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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the position of the National Joint Commission on Learning Disabilities regarding the needs of adults with learning disabilities (LD). Among problems cited are lack of adequate assessment procedures for the population along with inadequate awareness of the social and emotional problems facing adults with LD. Five major recommendations are made: that all involved personnel understand the nature of LD; that preparation for postsecondary programs or employment be emphasized from elementary school; that all agencies work to assure accommodation of adults with LD, especially within postsecondary programs and vocational training programs; that other professions such as medicine, law, and rehabilitation counseling develop appropriate curricula for this population; and that mental health professionals become more aware of the needs of individuals with LD. (CL)

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LEARNING DISABILITIES: THE NEEDS OF ADULTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

A Position Paper of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities
January 30, 1983

Learning Disabilities are a heterogeneous group of disorders[1] that persist into adult life, to varying degrees, and with different outcomes[2]. Although there are many adults with learning disabilities who are successful, a significant number of adults have not completed secondary school, or have difficulty with admission to and completion of postsecondary education. Still others are ill-prepared to achieve appropriate vocational goals. Many adults with learning disabilities also experience difficulties in their personal, social and emotional adjustment.

A consideration of the needs of adults with learning disabilities must address the following problems.

1. There is a lack of appreciation for the persistence of learning disabilities, their heterogeneity, and their changing manifestations throughout the life span of an individual.

2. There is a lack of appropriate assessment procedures that can be used in determining the abilities and needs of adults with learning disabilities.

3. There is a lack of appropriate instruction, prevocational preparation, and interdisciplinary planning at all educational levels. These activities are essential to facilitate the transition of individuals with learning disabilities to postsecondary programs[3], vocational training opportunities, or employment.

4. There is a lack of adequate training and preparation of professionals who will be responsible for service delivery to adults with learning disabilities.

5. There is a lack of awareness of the serious personal, social, and emotional problems often encountered by individuals with learning disabilities and the effects of these problems on adaptation to life tasks.

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[1] Learning Disabilities: Issues on Definition. A Position Paper of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, January 30, 1981.

[2] While the NJCLD recognizes that some learning disabilities may be acquired subsequent to central nervous system trauma or disease, this paper focuses on those individuals with learning disabilities that are developmental in nature and persist in adult life.

[3] The term postsecondary programs as used in this paper includes vocational technical schools, community colleges, proprietary schools, and institutions of higher education, including undergraduate, graduate and professional schools.

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6. There is a lack of sufficient programs at the postsecondary level that appropriately meet the educational, emotional, and social needs of individuals with learning disabilities.

7. There is a lack of advocacy for adults with learning disabilities as well as programs, services, and vocational training in business, industry, unions, and government agencies, including the armed forces.

After considering these problems, the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities makes the following recommendations, some of which will require the development of innovative and creative funding patterns for their effective implementation.

1. All employers, federal, state and local agency personnel, and concerned professionals who provide for adults with learning disabilities must have a clear understanding of this population. This understanding should include the following: knowledge of the characteristics of learning disabilities; knowledge of the fact that learning disabilities persist into adult life; knowledge of the heterogeneity of learning disabilities; knowledge of the variations in individual learning styles, communicative and cognitive abilities as well as differences in ability to attain skills. Such understanding is essential for the effective planning, design, and implementation of appropriate educational and vocational programs. Decisions about programs and services are influenced by the following: the individual's learning and psychological characteristics; the instructional and training approaches used; other resources, such as support groups or specific therapies, available to the adult with learning disabilities; geographic constraints; the educational and vocational philosophy of the agencies providing services or employment; and the competence, experience, and attitudes of those within the public and the private sector toward adults with learning disabilities.

2. The provision of programs and services as well as the preparation of individuals with learning disabilities for transition to postsecondary programs or vocational training must be emphasized from the elementary school level. This necessitates the provision of review systems that will monitor throughout the school years the individual's progress to ensure that appropriate educational or prevocational services are provided as needed. This may require radical changes in some of our current practices. While continued emphasis on remediation of basic academic skills, adaptive curriculum, and improvement of study skills is important, there is a distinct need to provide alternative programs. These would include career education programs beginning in elementary school, training in industrial skills, creative and performing arts, development of computer skills, and the use of technical aids in the regular classroom, e.g., calculators, audio and video tape recorders. Furthermore, individual and group experiences need to be provided for students with learning disabilities to enhance interpersonal and social skills, the development of an appreciation for the self, ability to be flexible in dealing with various novel educational and social situations, development of independent living skills, and the development of autonomy, including self-advocacy abilities. A realistic appreciation of the individual's genuine abilities will facilitate appropriate counseling, guidance, and direction for the determination of career options.

3. Consistent with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and regulations implementing Section 504 of that Act, postsecondary and vocational training programs as well as appropriate federal, state and local agencies need to continue their efforts to develop effective plans, programs and methods for the accommodation of adults with learning disabilities. This is needed to facilitate transition from secondary education systems and to ensure accessibility to systems that will allow the development of career opportunities. Essentially, such planning will necessitate the creation of innovative consortia among all those agencies and personnel working with and concerned about adults with learning disabilities. These consortia also should include families of and adults with learning disabilities. The following are of particular importance:

   a. Postsecondary Programs: Those planning postsecondary programs for individuals with learning disabilities should establish an interdisciplinary advisory council that will develop guidelines and be responsible for monitoring their implementation as related to programs and services in learning disabilities. Such guidelines should address (1) admission criteria and procedures; (2) procedures for the assessment of the individual's needs; (3) inservice programs for administrators, advisors, counselors, and faculty to increase their understanding of the nature and depth of the problems encountered by adults with learning disabilities; (4) the development of guidelines for course selection and sequences; (5) the development of tutorial and other methods to provide support to the student, including the development of study skills; development of reasoning and decision-making skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities; mathematical abilities; the use of library research facilities; the use of adaptive and modified methods of instruction; the development of alternative means for evaluating the student's learning of course content materials, e.g., the use of oral instead of written examination and the provision for untimed examinations; (6) the opportunity for individual and group psychological assistance, including the establishment of peer support groups and career counseling.

   b. Vocational Training: The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, including Section 504, mandates that vocational training programs be available to adults with learning disabilities. In implementing the law, diverse and unrelated vocational training programs have been developed across the public and the private sector. As a result, there is a lack of coordinated planning and implementation of vocational training programs, causing confusion and deterring accessibility to programs by adults with learning disabilities. There is an urgent need for the establishment of coordinated, inter-agency plans and guidelines that should address the following: referral and screening procedures; eligibility criteria; diagnostic procedures; counseling procedures and program planning; job placement, job holding, and follow-up procedures; employment performance evaluation procedures; and procedures for the provision of additional support services as needed. Materials that can be used by professionals, parents, and individuals with learning disabilities should be developed in order to ensure access to vocational training.

   c. Other employment opportunities: There is an even more urgent need to develop effective networks among agencies responsible for providing vocational training or rehabilitation and business, industry, unions and

civil service employment agencies. These networks are essential to facilitate the training and employment of adults with learning disabilities and to ensure appropriate management of adults already in the work force. In addition, there should be consideration for the design and implementation of effective programs for those adults with learning disabilities in the armed forces.

4. In order to provide for the needs of adults with learning disabilities, appropriate curricula must be developed in the fields of vocational and rehabilitative counseling as well as in such disciplines as medicine, law, psychology, and social work. While issues in the preparation of professional personnel who are delivering services to individuals with learning disabilities have been addressed previously[4], it is important to emphasize the use of continuing education programs as a means for providing professionals practicing in disciplines serving adults with essential information about the problems and needs of those with learning disabilities.

5. There must be increased awareness among mental health professionals of the unique personal, social, and emotional difficulties that individuals with learning disabilities experience, e.g., disturbances in family relationships, interaction with spouses and children, and the social institutions in which adults must function. Throughout their lives some individuals with learning disabilities have been exposed to teachers, parents, peers, and other mentors who were not prepared or willing to understand their needs or to help them cope with their problems. This contributed to the development of severe emotional damage in some instances. Mental health professionals must be prepared to prevent and treat the possible psychological consequences of persistent learning disabilities, which might include antisocial behaviors, chronic depression, suicide, and substance abuse. The inevitable consequences of attempts to cope in a culture that makes demands without understanding and impose without sensitivity are all too apparent.

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities is a committee of cooperating organizations concerned with individuals with learning disabilities. Organizations represented and representatives for 1982 include:

Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association

Council for Learning Disabilities

Division for Children with Communication Disorders, Council for Exceptional Children

International Reading Association

The Orton Dyslexia Society

This is a final draft copy of a position paper of the NJCLD. This copy has been forwarded for final approval and adoption to the governing body of the member

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[4]Learning Disabilities: Issues in the Preparation of Professional Personnel. A Position Paper of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities. September 26, 1982.

associations, and final adoption is pending.

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